

## INNOVATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS TOUCH THE HUMAN SPIRIT

*Urban cultural initiatives celebrate traditions, brings families and communities together*

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*The young pow wow dancers enter the hall, their regalia alive with the familiar sounds of jingle cones and prairie grasses.*

*Faces aglow with excitement, they begin to move to the beat of the drum. With ornate outfits sewn painstakingly by hand, the children swirl past the audience - keenly aware of the awed expressions and murmurs of appreciation they have created.*

*Heads held high, eyes filled with pride, these young dancers are embarking upon a journey of cultural and community renewal, the roots of which lie at the heart of Winnipeg's inner city.*

*The fact that many of these children have experienced much instability in their young lives is what makes their performance far from ordinary.*

*Most are in the care of child and family services, residing not with their biological parents, but with foster families. And while on the surface, their situations appear typical of the challenges facing Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the story that lies beneath is one of renewed hope and strength for Aboriginal children, families and communities.*

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The dancers are members of **'Rising Sun – Sons & Daughters of the Four Directions'** a unique community development initiative in Winnipeg that offers children and families a chance to reconnect to their culture while building strong relationships. Funded by Winnipeg Child & Family Services and Neighbourhoods Alive, it is just one of many positive programs and services that are being offered for Aboriginal children and families in this prairie city, and is testament to the many positive stories that exist in Aboriginal communities across this country.

Delivered by the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, an urban Aboriginal family resource centre, it is powerful proof that community-based solutions to poverty and its related challenges work.

Since 1984, Ma Mawi as it is known, has taken a lead role in empowering people to care for themselves and each other. Developed initially in response to the overwhelming numbers of Aboriginal children and families in conflict with the child welfare system, Ma Mawi has evolved to become an Aboriginal solution to supporting and rebuilding families.

In the last five years, the agency has moved towards a community development approach to service delivery, creating numerous opportunities for family and community involvement in the neighbourhoods it supports.

*“We believe that strengthening families is the most important investment we can make in our community’s future,”* states Communications Director, Michelle Boivin. *“By focusing on the positive and building upon individual strengths, we have helped our families make huge strides in their ability to nurture and provide healthy environments for their children.”*

According to Boivin, by recognizing the importance of reciprocal relationships with its community members, Ma Mawi has become much more than a service agency. Through non-adversarial, preventive and supportive programs and services, it has instead become a safe place that Aboriginal children and families count on for meaningful support.

Located in the inner north and west ends of Winnipeg, Ma Mawi contends daily with the serious social and economic challenges that poverty brings. Here, Aboriginal people make up over 20% of the neighbourhood population, yet 85% of these households fall below the poverty line.

What makes Ma Mawi programs so successful is a strong belief in the individual and collective strengths of the community, and a commitment to creating a leadership role for community members. All of Ma Mawi’s programs and services are community based and operate within a philosophy that is embodied in their name, which translated from Ojibway means: *“We all work together to help one another”*.

These words reflect traditional Aboriginal values of collective responsibility and reciprocity towards helping each other. More telling is Ma Mawi’s recognition that at some point, all families need help to deal with the challenges that arise from living and raising children in an urban environment.

Part of this recognition has meant the development of unique cultural initiatives for at risk youth. For the past eight months, Ma Mawi has operated the ‘Rising Sun’ Program to respond to the community’s needs. Offered four days a week, the program provides a gathering place for the community and a chance for families to learn the aboriginal culture.

*“The program has been tremendously successful, not only for the children participating, but for entire families”* states Josie Hill, Executive Director. The fact that seventy percent of these children are in the care of Winnipeg Child & Family Services is what makes this program even more remarkable.

*“The sense of ownership and pride that has been created in our community is truly incredible”*, she continues, the satisfaction of this accomplishment clearly visible. *“We have foster parents sewing the dance outfits, volunteers preparing the snacks, parents and community members - even former gang members learning to dance, and professional dancers sharing their skills and knowledge with the children themselves.”*

By all accounts, the program is not just about children.

*“It is about families coming together, becoming stronger, and becoming closer,”* states Program Coordinator Lawrence ‘Spatch’ Mulhall.

*“Dancing pow wow and learning the traditional teachings has really helped entire families to heal, and entire communities to take responsibility for the care and nurturing of children,”* he continues.

Experiential research is adding further credence to this claim. With attendance swelling upwards of 120 children and parents per week, the pow wow club is clearly demonstrating how cultural development can positively contribute to the resiliency of youth and families.

News of the programs success has traveled quickly. In addition to recent performances before the Winnipeg Police, Assiniboine Credit Union, and various Elder’s gatherings throughout the city, the youth have been invited to perform during the opening and closing ceremonies for the North American Indigenous Games.

The Pow Wow Club is just one element of Ma Mawi’s community-based initiatives that focus on the healthy development of the Aboriginal youth. Other offerings include Aboriginal Scouts and weekly Sweat Lodge teachings.

Additional programs such as the *Adolescent Parent Support Project*, *Positive Adolescent Sexuality Support*, *Healthy Relationships for Young Men and Women*, and *Family Violence Prevention* also work together as part of a coordinated strategy that strives to assist Winnipeg’s Aboriginal youth to become more involved in their communities as responsible citizens.

Recently, Ma Mawi took another giant step forward in meeting this goal.

In January it opened its doors to a fledgling Aboriginal youth group in need of assistance. The Owiiisookaage(g) group – which translates from Ojibway means “those who work closely together to help others” had been in operation since 2000, providing support to the Aboriginal community when their core funding was cut.

Despite providing a much-needed service in the community, local urban Aboriginal funding sources did not support Owii’s vision and withdrew funding at a critical time in the organization’s early development stages.

Rather than folding in the face of such setback, the youth group instead approached Ma Mawi for support - who were only too happy to oblige. The fierce passion and determination demonstrated by the youth compelled Ma Mawi to share office space and administrative support.

It didn’t take long for that investment to pay off. In the four months since taking the group under its wings, Owiiisookaage(g) has won the Mayor’s 2002 Volunteer Service Award and secured contracts with Canadian Heritage, the Province of Manitoba and Health Canada. *“Partnering with Ma Mawi has been such a positive experience. We have developed an excellent relationship because our mandates are very similar. Thanks to their support, we are in a more stable position and have a better opportunity to serve our community”.* states Crystal McLeod, manager of the youth group.

But the successes do not end here.

In 2000, Ma Mawi launched the Adolescent Parent Support Project (APSP) in recognition of the high rates of teen pregnancy throughout Manitoba. With funding from the provincial government, Ma Mawi was able to refurbish a small apartment building in Winnipeg's West End that can house up to eleven girls and their babies.

Girls arrive at the centre when they're between three and six months pregnant, with most being referred from Winnipeg Child and Family Services. *"Our girls are from all kinds of situations"* states site manager Diane Roussin. *"Now that they're pregnant, either their home environment couldn't support them or they were living on the street, bouncing from one friend's couch to another"* she continues.

With program funding received through Manitoba Family Services and Housing, participants work toward the goal of independent living, attending school and participating in 10 weeks of wholistic prenatal and postnatal programming. Family Group Conferencing, independent living skills, nutritional programming and a father's component are also part of the program.

*"We try to build on family and friend supports,"* adds Roussin. *"We get each girl to identify who is supportive in her life, and then we pull all those people together,"* she continues. *"We're not going to be here forever, so we don't want to create a dependency on us."*

The APSP has five different steps. Each girl is automatically on the first step when they enter the program. As time goes by, girls are given more responsibility until they are capable of living on their own.

Becky Trout is the first young mom to complete the program, and is a star graduate.

At 16, Becky found herself pregnant and without the support of her partner. Living with her family for the first five months of her pregnancy, Becky's concern for the future well-being of her baby led her to find the APSP. *"I felt positive and hopeful,"* she states, speaking about her first impressions of the program. *"The staff helped me so much in those first few months after having my baby,"* she continues. *"I had a lot of struggles to overcome, but was able to finish the program with their support."*

In June, Becky, now 18, will have a chance to share her story with an international audience in Pacific Grove California. As the keynote presenter at the National Centre on Family Group Decision Making Annual Conference, Becky is embarking upon a journey that will take her far from home. It will also take her far from the humble beginnings that brought her to the Adolescent Parent Support Project to a future filled with endless opportunities.

And Becky wants to give back to her community. It's her way of coming full circle. She continues to be involved in the program as a mentor to new participants and an advisor to Ma Mawi. With high school graduation around the corner, she is also making plans to attend college and return to work at the very place that supported her success.

Becky is living testimony to youth engagement strategies that work.

By creating opportunities for healing and growth that meaningfully involve youth, young people such as Becky are making positive life choices, releasing their ability to give back to the community.

Through valuable youth participation, Ma Mawi continues to extend their youth development strategy. With a strong neighborhood presence and positive relationships with the community it serves, Ma Mawi is instilling a sense of community control and empowerment with Winnipeg's inner city youth.

The positive signs of youth making a difference and neighborhoods caring like never before show that despite the negative reputations, stories, and stereotypes, hope and strength is plentiful in Winnipeg's Aboriginal community. Neighbourhoods are experiencing a resurgence of culture, education and community development initiatives like never before.

The vision is strong and the path is clear.

For more information, visit [www.mamawi.com](http://www.mamawi.com)